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ABSTRACT

This report provides statistical evidence that presents a picture at variance with the conventional portrayal of inner city youth. Using data from a national longitudinal study of high school students, the High School and Beyond survey, the study shows that young people display more resilience than they are usually given credit for. Comparison of the employment and education profiles of inner-city and non inner-city students over a 6-year time period beginning with the second semester of the high school sophomore year shows that inner city youth get off to a slow start in comparison with their noninner city counterparts with respect to certain broad measures of labor market and school success, but then catch up to a significant degree in the early years after high school. These results do not support the conventional wisdom that predicts irreversible and increasing despair among inner city adolescents as they leave high school and enter the "real world." Dropouts tend to return to school, and the unemployed tend to find jobs. (SLD)

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The research reported herein was supported in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities (CEIC) at the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the supporting agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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POST-SECONDARY EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION STATUS OF INNER CITY YOUTH: CONVENTIONAL WISDOM RECONSIDERED

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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly believed that the majority of adolescents growing up in the inner city are trapped in a self-fulfilling cycle of failure brought about by the poverty and hopelessness of their environment. Initial setbacks in school and the labor market lead to discouraged student and worker effects which feed back and cause additional setbacks in both arenas and further losses of self-confidence. According to this view, most of the young people caught in this downward spiral eventually cease pursuing conventional careers and settle instead into lives of irregular employment, welfare dependency, crime, drug abuse, or some combination of all of these.

The purpose of this paper is to present some statistical evidence which paints a different picture of inner city youth. Using data from a national longitudinal survey of high school students, we show that inner city young people display considerably more resilience than they are usually given credit for. We do this by comparing the employment and education profiles of inner city and non-inner city students over a six year time horizon beginning with the second semester of their sophomore year in high school. Our results indicate that inner city youth get off to a slower start than their non-inner city counterparts with respect to certain broad measures of labor market and school success, but then "catch up" to a significant degree in the early years after high school. This research is part of a larger project on the transition from school to work in the inner city being carried out by the authors. A more extended version of the paper may be obtained upon request (Stull and Goetz, 1993).

DATA

Over the past twenty years the National Center for Education Statistics has undertaken three large longitudinal surveys of American high school students: the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, High School and Beyond (1980), and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. We use the High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey because it is the only one of the three that provides relatively recent national data on both the secondary school and post-secondary school experiences of young people. The HS&B database contains information on two cohorts of students: those who were sophomores in 1980 and those who were seniors (Sebring et al., 1987). Each cohort was surveyed in the spring of 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1986. Substantial efforts were made to ensure a high response rate so there was little attrition from one wave of the survey to the next.

The research results reported in this paper are based on data from the sophomore cohort. The sophomores were chosen for two reasons. First, we wanted to include dropouts in our analysis and, second, we wanted two years of observations on the students' high school experiences. Approximately 15,000 sophomores were selected to participate in all four waves of the HS&B survey. Of these, 11,683 (78.8%) actually did so. We refer to this last group as the full participation cohort.

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DEFINITION OF INNER CITY

Our analysis is based on a division of the full participation cohort into inner city and non-inner city subcohorts. After some experimentation, we chose a definition of inner city based on school location and family socioeconomic status (SES). Specifically, a respondent is defined to be an inner city student if both of the following conditions hold:

(1) He or she attended an urban high school in 1980

(2) He or she had a family with low SES in 1980.

For the purposes of this definition an urban high school is one which was located in the central city of an SMSA in 1980. A more focused classification which would restrict the analysis to students who attended schools located in particular parts of these cities (for example, high poverty areas) is precluded by the confidentiality requirements of HS&B. A low SES family is one which scored below the median in 1980 on an HS&B SES composite variable made up of five equally weighted components: father's occupation, father's education, mother's education, family income, and material possessions in the household. Students who attended nonurban high schools, had high SES families, or both are defined to be non-inner city students.

When this definition is applied to the full participation cohort, 1648 students (14.1%) are classified as inner city students and 10,035 (85.9%) as non-inner city students. When the two groups are compared using various socioeconomic indicators, they differ from one another substantially (Stull and Goetz, 1993). In addition to the SES and school location differences that are used to define them, inner city youth are much more likely than non-inner city youth to be minority group members, to live in the northeastern part of the United States, and to attend public schools. They also on average have lower test scores and grades. These differences are all in the expected direction and suggest that inner city high school students are a population with both special characteristics and special problems.

RESULTS

In order to track the progress of the inner city and non-inner city subcohorts as they moved through high school and then out into a variety of post-secondary activities, we created a set of profile tables for both groups showing their joint employment and education status at three points in time: 1980 when they were sophomores, 1982 when those who remained in school were seniors, and 1986 when those who graduated on time had been out of high school for four years (Stull and Goetz, 1993). These tables distinguish between part-time and full-time work and also between part-time and full-time schooling. Since space is limited here, we present two summary tables derived from this effort.

Table 1 uses two indices of educational attainments -- school attendance and possession of a high school diploma -- to show how the education status of the two subcohorts changed over the HS&B time horizon. In 1980 all students were sophomores in high school so the school attendance rate was 100% and the diploma rate was zero for both groups. By 1982 many students no longer attended their original school. Some graduated early, others transferred to another school, and still others dropped out. The second row of Table 1 shows that the school attendance rates for inner city youth and

non-inner city youth in that year were 73.2% and 83.0% respectively. After adjusting these figures for early graduation rates (shown in the third and fourth columns), they tell us that the short term dropout rate was 22.7% for the inner city subcohort and 13.9% for the non-inner city subcohort -- a difference of 8.8 percentage points. This difference is consistent with our a priori expectation that dropout rates should be significantly higher among inner city youth than among non-inner city youth.

TABLE 1

School Attendance and High School Diploma Rates for Subcohorts: 1980, 1982, and 1986

	School Attendance Rate		H.S. Diploma Rate	
Year	Inner City	Non-Inner City	Inner City	Non-Inner City
1980	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
1982	73.2	83.0	4.1	3.1
1986	27.7	39.6	86.1	92.5

The third row of the table shows the education status of the two groups in 1986. Virtually all of the young people still in school at that time were attending two or four year institutions of higher learning. There are two things to note about these figures. First, by subtracting the diploma rates from unity long term dropout rates for the two groups can be calculated -- 13.9% for inner city students and 7.5% for non-inner city students, a difference of 6.4 percentage points. Comparing these to the corresponding short term rates we see that almost 40% of the 1982 inner city dropouts and 50% of the non-inner city dropouts had earned a diploma by 1986, either through the GED equivalency process or other means. The dropout "gap" between the two groups thus declined over the four year period. Second, the school attendance rate for inner city students in 1986 was 11.9 percentage points below that of the non-inner city students but most of this difference can be accounted for by the higher (short term) dropout rate of the former. If an inner city student graduated "on time," he or she had only a slightly smaller probability of attending a post-secondary educational institution four years later than did a non-inner city graduate.

Table 2 presents the labor force participation and unemployment rates for the two groups. The first two columns show that the inner city and non-inner city labor force participation rates increased in tandem from 1980 to 1986. There thus appear to be no important discouraged worker effects among the inner city young people.

The story told by the second two columns is more complex. In 1980, as one

would expect, the inner city unemployment rate was much higher than the non-inner city rate -- a difference of 15.1 percentage points. Thereafter, both rates declined as the young people matured, but the inner city rate fell much faster than the non-inner city rate. By 1986 the former was only 2.8 percentage points above the latter. This convergence cannot be explained by macroeconomic factors because the U.S. economy was contracting between 1980 and 1982 and expanding between 1982 and 1986. Instead, the results suggest a learning-by-doing model of job search in which inner city youth have the same attachment to the labor force as non-inner city youth (as shown by their identical labor force participation rates), have fewer job search skills and employment opportunities initially, but then eventually learn enough about where jobs are and how to get them to almost catch up to their non-inner city counterparts.

TABLE 2

Labor Force Participation and Unemployment Rates for Subcohorts: 1980, 1982, and 1986

	L.F. Participation Rate		Unemployment Rate	
Year	Inner City	Non-Inner City	Inner City	Non-Inner City
1980	56.6%	55.9%	42.6%	27.5%
1982	72.5	74.6	27.3	19.0
1986	80.1	76.1	10.5	7.7

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing results do not support the conventional wisdom which predicts irreversible and increasing despair among inner city adolescents as they leave high school and enter the "real world." Far from exhibiting discouraged worker or discouraged student effects, these young people appear to be quite resilient in the face of the hardships they encounter. Dropouts return to school to earn their diplomas; the unemployed continue to search for jobs until they find them; students from deprived family and school backgrounds pursue post-secondary education. All of these phenomena suggest that the negative stereotype of the inner city high school student needs some revision. In future research we plan to estimate some econometric models which will explain why and under what circumstances inner city students achieve the successes we seem to have discovered.

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The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities

The National Center on Education in the Inner Cities (CEIC) was established on November 1, 1990 by the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE) in collaboration with the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Houston. CEIC is guided by a mission to conduct a program of research and development that seeks to improve the capacity for education in the inner cities.

A major premise of the work of CEIC is that the challenges facing today's children, youth, and families stem from a variety of political and health pressures; their solutions are by nature complex and require long-term programs of study that apply knowledge and expertise from many disciplines and professions. While not forgetting for a moment the risks, complexity, and history of the urban plight, CEIC aims to build on the resilience and "positives" of inner-city life in a program of research and development that takes bold steps to address the question, "What conditions are required to cause massive improvements in the learning and achievement of children and youth in this nation's inner cities?" This question provides the framework for the intersection of various CEIC projects/studies into a coherent program of research and development.

Grounded in theory, research, and practical know-how, the interdisciplinary teams of CEIC researchers engage in studies of exemplary practices as well as primary research that includes longitudinal studies and field-based experiments. CEIC is organized into four programs: three research and development programs and a program for dissemination and utilization. The first research and development program focuses on the *family* as an agent in the education process; the second concentrates on the *school* and factors that foster student resilience and learning success; the third addresses the *community* and its relevance to improving educational outcomes in inner cities. The focus of the *dissemination and utilization* program is not only to ensure that CEIC's findings are known, but also to create a crucible in which the Center's work is shaped by feedback from the field to maximize its usefulness in promoting the educational success of inner-city children, youth, and families.

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